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ABSTRACT

Children's poetry no longer connotes holidays, nonsense, moral dicta, or the what's, why's, and how's of life, connotations that have frequently stereotyped poetry as sissy, baby, or boring stuff. Children's poems of the seventies suggest that any simple subject has become the province of a poem, including such topics as mud, oil slicks, sharks, elevators, worms, wrestling, skateboards, growling stomachs, moving, growing, and dreaming--all segments of a child's reality. The forms of children's poetry are looser, unrestricted by exact regularities in rhythm and rhyme, and invite a special kind of visual as well as aural interaction. With changes in both form and content, children are showing renewed interest in poetry. (AEA)

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On the Line: Children and Poetry in the Seventies

submitted by

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On the Line: Children and Poetry in the Seventies

Poetry has tumbled a long way in the whirling world of the seventies. To experience the distance traveled in this decade, we need to lift our eyes, not in prayer although the genre could use it as indicated by an elementary school librarian who remarked that she only buys poetry if there is any money left in her book budget. We lift our eyes, not for respect, for we already respect poetry. We lift our eyes, however, in readiness for a quick glimpse at some of the poetry turnabouts of the seventies.

In 1971, Nancy Larrick, a noted children's poet and anthologist, announced the need for such turnabouts. She states:

> It should not surprise us, then, to find that today's children seek the realistic poetry of bolder voices, speaking in a blunt conversational style. . . . The poetry young people want today is real. It relates to the world they know, and it invites them to become physically and emotionally involved. Involvement is what they demand.[1]

A squint into the sixties will reveal that children and poetry did not generally have this close, real involvement. Often before reading poems to children, I asked them who wrote poems. They responded with such answers as "God," "trees," "robins," "tulips," "weirdos," "Shakespeare," and "Mother Goose." Siv Widerberg's poem, perhaps, best summarizes what "poetry for children" meant.

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[1]Nancy Larrick, "Poetry That's Real," in Somebody Turned on a Tap in These Kids, ed. Nancy Larrick (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), p. 5.

STUPID NUMBER THREE

Poems

Poems can be
about anything

But poems FOR CHILDREN
are supposed to be
cute and sweet and all about
wee little mice
and dear little flowers
and Baby Jesus[2]

Children's poetry no longer necessarily connotes holidays, nonsense, moral dicta, Mothers Goose and Nature, or the what's, why's, and how's of life--connotations which have frequently stereotyped poetry as sissy, baby, or boring stuff. A close look by a reader at the poetry in any recent anthology reveals that noticeable changes in both content and form have occurred.

The content of children's poetry has extended from the earlier oftentimes cute, condescending, instructional, or sugarcoated to include a more realistic vision of the everyday. Children's interests have shaped the lines of poetry. Contemporary children's poetry, like modern American poetry, generally elicits a fuller picture of life by showing real life and its reversals: ordinary people, situations, objects, and feelings including the ugly as well as the pretty, the unhappy as well as the happy. The child persona, for example, in Bobbi Katz's "Samuel" describes one such unhappy reality.

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[2] "Stupid Number Three," from I'M LIKE ME by Siv Widerberg, trans. by Verne Moberg. © 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971 by Siv Widerberg; trans. copyright 1973 by Verne Moberg. The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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SAMUEL

I found this salamander
Near the pond in the wood.

  Samuel, I called him—
  Samuel, Samuel.

Right away I loved him.
He loved me too, I think.

  Samuel, I called him—
  Samuel, Samuel.

I took him home in a coffee can,
And at night
He slept in my bed.

In the morning
I took him to school.

He died very quietly during spelling.

Sometimes I think
I should have left him
Near the pond in the woods.

  Samuel, I called him—
  Samuel, Samuel. [3]

Other poems of the seventies suggest that any simple subject has become the province of a poem. Thus, we see poems about mud, oil slicks, sharks, elevators, worms, wrestling, skateboards, growling stomachs, moving, growing, and dreaming--all segments of a child's reality. The images, realistically rendered, are no longer routine and empty, but direct and sharp as in Mary Neville's "Lemons and Apples":

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[3]Bobbi Katz, for "Samuel." Copyright © 1972 by BOBBI KATZ. Reprinted by permission of the author.

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LEMONS AND APPLES

One day I might feel
Mean,
And squinched up inside,
Like a mouth sucking on a
Lemon.

The next day I could
Feel
Whole and happy
and right,
Like an unbitten apple.[4]

The forms of children's poetry are also looser than the traditional, sometimes artificial, limericks, couplets, and quatrains. Instead, they include a profusion of free verse with its organic typography and seemingly natural language and rhythm which is closer to the vernacular and tempo of the times. These changes in the seventies in both form and content are brought together most visibly in the free verse now available to children.

With this freer form, distinguished by its irregular line and rhyme, emerges the opportunity for a new kind of involvement often previously restricted by what the poet James Dickey terms the "'packaged' quality" of forced rhyming.[5] "I Have Two Little Servants," from the comic strip "Hagar the Horrible," is perhaps a typical example of such labored rhyme:

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[4]From WOODY AND ME, by Mary Neville. Copyright © 1966 by Mary Neville Woodrich and Ronnie Solbert. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, Inc.

[5]James Dickey, "The Poet Turns on Himself," in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1966), p. 229.

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I have two little servants
as nice as nice can be.
Their names are 'please'
and 'thank you, ma'm'
they do great things for me.

In free verse, meaning is not restricted by exact regularities in rhythm and rhyme. The elliptic, streamlined quality of this open form seemingly evokes heightened writer, listener, and reader participation. George Abbe in You and Contemporary Poetry elaborates:

> Modern poetry employs more indirection in rhyming (and "indirection" identifies modern poetry in general better than any one word I know). Poets formerly attempted to state something, so that the idea might be conveyed directly to the reader: the current poet yearns, out of subconscious and borderland regions, to be born and give birth alike at one and in the same moment of poetic being. Today, in keeping with this indirection, assonance, consonance, and partial rhymes of all types take the place of the old regular rhymes and melodic effects.[6]

Thus, the reading of any recent poem invites a special kind of interaction. The eyes as well as the ears are essential. Arnold Adoff's anthology title, It is the Poem Singing into Your Eyes (1971), expresses the importance of the appearance of words and lines on the printed page. The following poem by Lillian Morrison provides one sample of the poem as a visual experience, a poem that needs to be touched with the eyes:

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[6]You and Contemporary Poetry by George Abbe, 1965. William L. Bauhan Publisher, Dublin, N.H. (Formerly Richard R. Smith, Noone House), p. 62. Used by permission of William L. Bauhan.

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The Sidewalk Racer
or
On the Skateboard

Skimming
an asphalt sea
I swerve, I curve, I
sway; I speed to whirring
sound an inch above the
ground; I'm the sailor
and the sail; I'm the
driver and the wheel
I'm the one and only
single engine
human auto
mobile.[7]

Until the seventies, there had been little poetry out of the conventional lines in children's readers and poetry collections. Flora Arnstein (1962) observes:

> Many children have arrived in my classes convinced that nothing is poetry that is not of the "Dee-dum, dee-dum, dee-dum, dee-dee/ Dee-dum, dee-dum, dee-dum, you see" variety, so that it takes some time to displace this concept with a more valid one.[8]

However, with the changes in both form and content, children are showing renewed interest in poetry. Lines of poetry are fast becoming a part of rather than apart from children's speech and experience. School librarians report that Shel Silverstein's Where the Sidewalk Ends (1974) has disappeared from many libraries; now for the first time a poetry collection has been placed on reserve. Moreover, the emergence of

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[7]"The Sidewalk Racer or On the Skateboard" from THE SIDEWALK RACER AND OTHER POEMS OF SPORTS AND MOTION by Lillian Morrison. Copyright © 1965, 1967, 1968, 1977 by Lillian Morrison. Used by permission of Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, a division of William Morrow & Company, Inc. Publishers.

[8]Flora Arnstein, Poetry in the Elementary School (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 23. Used by permission of the author.

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free verse has encouraged hundreds of children to try poetry writing themselves. One teacher recently reported that her second grade student initiated a poetry service. Children submit topics; Marsha makes poems. Furthermore, as a result of several national efforts such as Phone-a-Poem, Poets in the Schools, and Poetry in Public Places, poems are being found in places other than on desktops and sidewalks and in restrooms and telephone booths. Children are now eager to see, touch, and hear poetry. As a result of the turnabouts in the seventies, poetry is being let out of books, and children and poetry are alined together in the eighties.

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